

TOPICALIZATION

Introductory

Here are two definitions of topic, each with its own merits:

- (i) The topic is the framework which restricts the applicability of the information that follows it, i.e. it restricts the applicability of the comment. In other words, the comment applies just to the topic, it does not apply to something else. Or
- (ii) The topic is what the speaker is talking about, and the comment is what he says about the topic.

Most languages have a neutral and various marked ways of expressing topic. There is a lot of similarity across languages.

1. Neutral (English)

John | likes hot dogs
topic | comment

'John' is both subject and topic
'likes hot dogs' is the comment

In most languages, the topic comes first in the clause in the neutral configuration, and some other configurations as well. (You generally tell your hearer what you are going to talk about before you talk about it. This seems to be desirable in many languages if you want good communication.) But in some languages the topic quite clearly comes last in the clause. Why this is so is still not well understood.

The topic, being what the clause is about, needs to be information that the hearer can handle. Generally it needs to be given information, i.e. information that the speaker believes the hearer has in his consciousness. (Chafe's definition.) And mostly it is definite information, i.e. information that refers to an entity that the hearer can identify in some meaningful way. There are, however, slight modifications of this.

Some have thought that topic and given information are synonymous but this is a mistake. In any narrative there are plenty of entities that are given information without being information that the speaker is really talking about.

Looking at the framework definition of topic, there can be individual, temporal, or locational. Here are simple illustrations:

- i. John likes hot dogs. (individual)
- ii Saturday will be a rest day (temporal)
- iii Nigeria has a hot climate (locational)

(in some languages all the above three kinds of frameworks are marked by the same affix.)

2. Fronting

(an element not usually in the clause initial position is 'fronted' to that position.)

- (i) Hot dogs, John likes. (from neutral 'John likes hot dogs')

topic comment

Usually there is a pause after the fronted NP (here 'Hot dogs'), and an accent on the fronted NP.

The fronting presents the fronted NP as a contrastive topic. In the example, 'Hot dogs' is set up as a topic in contrast to some other item. As in example

(ii)

A: What can we get for John at MacDonald's? They've got hamburgers, hot dogs, fishburgers and fried egg sandwiches.

B: Hot dogs, John likes. I wouldn't get any hamburgers though. (Here 'Hot dogs' is set up in contrast with 'hamburgers')

(iii) Situation of small child at table.

A: Daddy do I have to eat all of the bread. Even the crust?

B: The crust, you can leave. (But) the rest of the bread, you'll have to eat.

(Note how 'the crust' and 'the rest of the bread' are set up as contrastive topics with each other in successive clauses. Perhaps the pause isn't absolutely obligatory after the initial NP.)

(iv)

A: Have you seen either Ray or Bob?

B: Ray is in his office. Bob, I haven't seen.

(Note that 'Ray' and 'Bob' are both in the initial, i.e. topical position in their clauses, and that they are set up in contrast with each other. As you pass from the first clause to the second, you stop talking about 'Ray' and you talk about 'Bob' instead. The fronting of Bob signals this topic change.)

(v)

A: Do you dislike all languages? I thought you liked Latin.

B: Latin, I like, (But) French, I despise.

('Latin' is 'given' information, being explicitly mentioned in the preceding context. 'French' is a contrastive, focussed topic, but it is given in the sense that you can infer it from 'all languages'.)

(vi)

¹The furniture of the house Father Vaillant had bought from the departed Mexican priest. ²It was heavy and somewhat clumsy but not unsightly. ³All the wood used in making tables and bedsteads was hewn from tree boles with the axe or hatchet. ⁴Even the thick planks on which the Bishop's theological books rested were axe-dressed. ⁵There was not at that time a turning-lathe or saw mill in all northern New Mexico. ⁶The native carpenters whittled out chair rungs and table legs, and fitted them together with wooden pins instead of iron nails. ⁷Wooden chests were used in place of dressers with drawers, and sometimes these were beautifully carved, or covered with decorated leather. ⁸The desk at which the Bishop sat writing was an importation, a walnut 'secretary' of American make (sent down by one of the officers of the Fort at Father Vaillant's suggestion.) ⁹His silver candlesticks he had bought from France long ago. ¹⁰They were given to him by a beloved aunt when he was ordained. (Death Comes for the Archbishop by Willa Cather, page 34-5)

(Note that the bold type NP's in clauses 1, 8, 9 are fronted. The underlined NP's in clauses 3, 4, 7, 10 are passivized and so in essence also have an NP moved to the left or fronted. The total effect is to have all the articles of furniture (in clauses 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10) and the materials they were made from (clause 3) in the initial or topical position. This paragraph is about the house furnishings of the bishop; the fronting and passivization makes the passage neater and more coherent.

In quite a few languages, there is a sentence initial nominal which is a topic, but which is not the result of any fronting operation. We know this because that initial nominal does not bear any one of the surface syntactic relations such as subject, or object, etc with the verb.

Examples:

This field, the rice is very good. (Lahu)

That fire, fortunately the fire brigade came quickly (Mandarin)

School-wa, I was busy. (Japanese)

3 Left dislocation.

An NP is fronted and at the same time a pronoun copy of the fronted NP is left behind in the original place in the clause. (It is the pronoun copy that distinguishes left dislocation from fronting.)

Examples:

(i) Hot dogs, John likes them.

(ii) John, he likes hot dogs.

This kind of marked topicalization is used to reintroduce an old topic which was talked about once but which has lain dormant (or been held in escrow) for a long time. Somehow, the extra morphophonemic material takes a bit longer to say and gives the hearer a little bit longer time to process the topic back into his consciousness.

(iii) That man we both met at the market the other day, he dropped in to see me last night.

(iv) That bean tree we were talking about, they've just cut it down. Sorry, nice tree.

(v) That nice house on the corner of sixth and Eagle, it's up for sale.

Note that:

(a) there has to be a distinct pause after the comma, usually longer than the pause after the fronted element of the fronting topicalization described in the last section. Note the (chaotic) effect in conversation if you leave out this pause and also leave out the pronominal copy. If you do that when the topic has really lain dormant for a while, the hearer can be puzzled.

(b) the topic so introduced (or rather reintroduced) has not been in the hearer's consciousness at the beginning of the sentence, and so more morphophonemic material (i.e. the extra long pause and the extra pronoun) is needed to introduce it. This is an instance of a general iconicity principle that the bigger the change the more morphophonemic material is needed to express the change.

(c) compare the present examples with those of the previous section on fronting. In those examples, the fronted topics were already in the hearer's consciousness the whole time. Thus specifically in:

Ray's in his office. Bob I haven't seen

both 'Ray' and 'Bob' had just been mentioned in the immediately preceding context and so were both in the hearer's consciousness at that time.

In some recent research done on broadcast political interviews in the US, it was found that

fronting was used for topics that had been mentioned very recently and thus most likely to be in the hearer's consciousness.

left dislocation was used to reintroduce topics that had not been mentioned for a long time and thus most likely to be not in the hearer's consciousness

In some languages, you get a sentence initial nominal which bears no syntactic relation with the verb of that sentence. Furthermore there isn't any pronominal copy of the initial nominal in that first sentence. But if you look further on in the discourse, you find a coreferential nominal.

Example: Nambiquara (Brazil)

This comes from a story about building a bridge across a stream. To build a bridge you first need to get suitable wood.

Poles, we were down by the headwaters. So I said to them "Let's get some poles."

4 Right dislocation

The topic NP is rightshifted to the end of the main clause, and there is a pronoun copy of that topic NP left in the body of the clause. This is the mirror image of left dislocation.

(i) John likes them, hot dogs.

(ii) He dropped in to see me last night, the man that we both met at the market the other day.

Right dislocation is a kind of repair mechanism--an afterthought. The speaker starts by referring to an individual by a pronoun, and then he has doubts as to whether his hearer is absolutely clear as to who he is talking about--who he is referring to --by this pronoun. So he covers himself, clarifies the situation by

spelling out the pronoun referent in detail. The place he can do this is at the very end of the clause. It's an afterthought to cover the possible defect in the communication.

(iii) Situation: A translator couple in Irian Jaya, getting ready to go back to the village, are met by a friend while shopping downtown.

Friend: How's it all going?

Husband of couple: So, so. A ways to go yet.

Friend: Do you still have lots to do, shopping?

There are many things to be done in preparing to go to the village. So 'lots' in the last utterance could mean a number of different things, e.g. shopping, packing, repairing equipment, etc. But by being specific and mentioning 'shopping' in the right dislocated position, the friend makes it clear that what he meant by 'lots' was 'lots of shopping'.

A similar kind of thing can come on evaluative comments made at the end of a paragraph in conversation. For example:

(iv) After a discussion about someone called Leech, the speaker winds by saying

'Interesting chap, Leech.'

(v) After some comments about a lecture, the speaker might end up by saying

'Interesting lecture, that'

Note that the adjective needs to be evaluative. Either positive or negative will do, but the adjective cannot be neutral. Thus consider:

Interesting chap, Leech.

Nice

Wonderful

Dreadful

*Fat

*Skinny

Interesting lecture, that

Boring

Difficult

*Linguistics

*Scheduled

5. Pseudoclefts

This section and the next section are on pseudoclefts and clefts respectively. They are constructions with some similarities, but there are lots of differences between them too and it is important to recognize these differences. We start with pseudoclefts as they are rather easier. Here is an example

(i) What John is fond of is hot dogs

are

Note the following properties of this construction in English.

- (a) there are two phonological accents in any oral rendering of this construction, one somewhere before the second verb 'to be' and one after it.
- (b) the pseudocleft construction is one way of redistributing given and new information. The topic in the pseudocleft 'what John is fond of' is made up partly of the old topic 'John', and partly of some of the old comment 'is fond of hot dogs'
- (c) the Wh-clause (we might call it the relative clause) must be given information in some meaningful sense of being recoverable from the preceding linguistic context or from the situational context. How it is recoverable is shown in detail immediately below:

First, a new term: The inferential bridge is the bridge you must construct to get from the preceding context to the content of the Wh-clause in the case of the pseudoclefts (or also the relative clause in the case of it-clefts.)

Kinds of inferential bridge for pseudoclefts in English.

- (1) Explicit information already in the preceding context becomes the information in the Who clause. (So the reader has very little inferential work to do.)

Example ii:

In Clark and Haviland they say that "when the listener cannot find a direct antecedent most commonly he will be able to form an indirect antecedent by building an inferential bridge from something he already knows." Certainly WHAT THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT is the establishment of the definiteness of one particular by inference from another particular. (Chafe 1976:42)

(Note that the content of the pseudocleft "what they are talking about" is explicitly mentioned as "they say.." in the preceding context.)

- (2) Implicit information in the preceding context leads to the content of the Who clause. (the reader has a little more inferential work to do.)

Example iii

At first contact he (Hitler) developed a furious hatred for the party of the Social Democrats. "WHAT MOST REPELLED ME," he says, "was its hostile attitude toward the struggle for..." (Shirer -The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, p 22)

(Note how "furious hatred" easily leads to "most repelled me")

- (3) contrast between information in the preceding context and information in the Who clause.

Example iv

Precisely how pseudoclefts are formed need not concern us. WHAT IS RELEVANT is that in all the cases examined above--and in fact in most pseudoclefts--the constituent following 'be' is an NP (from Akmajian and Heny 1975:316)
(Note the contrast between 'need not concern us' and 'What is relevant')

Example v

Our position is a dynamic one. It will be more and more refined as conditions change in the course of the struggle. WHAT IS CONSTANT is our commitment to a revolutionary emancipation of Ethiopia. (Challenge p1)
(Note the contrast between 'dynamic' in the preceding context and 'constant' in the Who clause.)

Example vi

The Allies wanted a cheap peace. WHAT THEY GOT was four years of disastrous war. (Churchill)
(Note the contrast between 'wanted' in the preceding context and 'got' in the Who clause.)

Example vii

Situation: Checking over a list of ingredients for preparing a meal.

We already have meat, tomato paste, onions. WHAT WE STILL NEED is spaghetti.
(contrast between 'what we already have' and 'what we still need'.)

Example viii.

To a tired friend.

Put that medicine away. WHAT YOU NEED is a good rest.
(There is a contrast between 'what you don't need so put it away,' and 'what you do need'.)

(4) Metalinguistic antecedents.

When a speaker speaks (or a writer writes) there are certain things that anyone can reasonably assume of him/her. Here are some:

- i. that that speaker means something
- ii that the speaker may have a problem (i.e. be worried about something)

Example ix

WHAT I MEAN is that we need something to answer somebody.
(Nixon)
(this was said following something that he said that sounded confusing.)

Example x

WHAT REALLY TROUBLES ME is, will this thing not break someday and the whole thing start crumbling (Dean to Nixon about Watergate.)

(5) The Who clause content is related to the concerns of the hearer.

Example xi

A: Hello operator, I'm trying to dial 871-2532. Could you please check it for me.

B: (after checking) WHAT HAPPENED is that the whole exchange got overloaded. Wait a while and try again. (the hearer, i.e. the subscriber, is interested in knowing what happened, what the problem was.)

Example xii

WHAT I WANT TO TALK ABOUT TODAY is topicalization.

(said by a lecturer at the beginning of a lecture. It is a fair assumption that at the beginning of a lecture, what the lecturer is about to talk about is a concern of the audience.)

6. Clefts (or it-clefts)

Example i

It is John who is fond of hot dogs.

Note the following properties of this construction

(a) the phonological accent automatically comes on John, i.e. on the nominal immediately following the (first) verb 'to be'. There is no other place that the phonological accent can come and still make good English.

(b) the cleft construction is another way of redistributing given and new information. In the original neutral sentence 'John is fond of hot dogs', 'John' is given and the rest is new. In the cleft, on the other hand, the old comment has gone into the relative clause where it is usually regarded as given information, while John has become contrastive.

(c) the cleft construction singles out the accented nominal (here 'John') to refer to the only one who possesses the property or attribute mentioned in the relative clause. A fair paraphrase of the above cleft construction would be

'John and nobody else is fond of hot dogs'

Thus both uniqueness and contrastiveness are at issue.

(d) the status of the information in the relative clause of a cleft construction needs very careful consideration. We now pass on to do this.

The information in relative clauses of cleft sentences.

The information in the relative clause of an it-cleft cannot always be assumed to be in the hearer's consciousness; that is to say, it is not always given information. Rather it is known information.

Note the following definitions

GIVEN INFORMATION: Information that the cooperative speaker may assume is appropriately in the hearer's consciousness.

2

KNOWN INFORMATION: Information that the speaker represents as being factual and as already known to certain persons, but not necessarily including the hearer.

There are really two different kinds of it-clefts as far as the hearer's ability to infer the relative clause information (from the preceding context) is concerned--

(i) those it clefts with RC information that the hearer can infer with some effort, and

(ii) those whose RC information is not inferrable at all because it is so new.

We now divide our treatment on the basis of these two kinds.

1. It-clefts with RC information that is inferrable with effort from the context.

Example i

I've been bit once by a German shepherd. It was really scary. IT WAS AN OUTSIDE METER THE WOMAN HAD. I read the gas meter and was walking back out when... (statement by a meter reader)
(Knowing the man was a meter reader you could infer from this what the situation was, but just the preceding linguistic context wouldn't have enough information for you to do it successfully.
@What the woman had' was certainly not in the hearer's consciousness at the beginning of the third sentence. The hearer might not even have known that a woman was involved; note that she isn't ever identified!)

Example ii

A: Mmm...(eating pieces of fudge)

B: Aren't those good! IT WAS ONLY SHEER WILL POWER THAT KEPT ME FROM EATING TWELVE EVERY NIGHT.

(The hearer wasn't necessarily thinking of what stopped B from eating all the fudge up last night.)

Example iii

So I learned to sew books. They're really good books. IT'S JUST THE COVERS THAT ARE ROTTEN.

In the above example, "that are rotten" is quite easily inferrable from the fact that the speaker sews books, i.e. something must be rotten. Here covers takes the sentence stress and is contrastive-only the covers were rotten, the rest of the books were OK.

2. It clefts with RC information that is completely new.

Example iv

IT WAS JUST ABOUT 50 YEARS AGO THAT HENRY FORD GAVE US THE WEEKEND. On September 25, 1925, in a somewhat shocking move for that time, he decided to establish a 40 hour work week, giving his employees two days off instead of one (from a Philadelphia daily newspaper editorial.)

(Here, the relative clause information "Henry Ford gave us the weekend" is completely new information. This is the first

sentence of the editorial and there is no preceding linguistic context. The RC information is known by the speaker (editor) but not necessarily by the hearer (readers). In fact the purpose of the construction in this example is mainly to inform the reader.

Example v

It was now in this deadly atmosphere that THE FLASH CAME WHICH PRODUCED THE BRITISH EXPLOSION. (Churchill's History).

(The occasion is the very beginning of the 18th century. There was great political tension between England and France. England was resentful of some French military moves and was preparing for war. (hence the expression 'deadly atmosphere.')

The immediately following sentences in the text spell out in detail the events that led eventually to a severance of diplomatic relations and a declaration of war.)

7. Presentatives (or existentials).

Example i

There are hot dogs in the fridge.

Note the following properties:

(a) the standard form is *There is* or *There are* followed by a nominal referring to an entity (here 'hot dogs') and often there is a location (here 'in the fridge')

(b) presentatives are a device for introducing or presenting a new participant or a new prop into the story at the appropriate point. (You introduce the entity into the story at the point where you need it; you don't introduce all the participants and props into the story at the beginning.)

Example ii

There's a man at the gate waiting to see you.
(this introduces a new participant 'a man' in a location 'at the gate' at this point.)

Example iii

There are fingerprints on that glass in the sitting room. I want to talk to you about them.
(this introduces a new prop 'fingerprints' into the story in the location 'on that glass in the sitting room')

Example iv

Little Red Riding Hood is quietly walking along the path.

There right at the side of the path stood a big grey wolf.

(introduces a new participant (a major one) 'the wolf' into the story at this point.)

8 Affixial morphemes to mark topic

Some languages have special affix morphemes that mark a nominal as topical. For instance, Japanese -wa. Nevertheless,

even in such languages, the preferred word order is for the topic to come first in the clause.

In English, expressions like

Concerning X...

Speaking of X...

As for X...

have the function of introducing the topic. However, since there are three such expressions, one should be slow to dismiss them as all being topic markers and leave it simply at that. Rather, we should inquire as to how they differ in their usage.

More precisely, As for X...allows us to introduce a topic which contrasts with the current topic, for example

(a) Bill's going to have trouble in his math exam. Charlie's weak in history. As for John he should pass in everything.

(John is a contrastive topic, contrasting with Bill and Charlie the previous topics. I would hesitate to say that John was completely new. As a matter of fact, the speaker has in mind the whole set of exam candidates as he is talking and he assumes that the hearer has that set in his consciousness too. That set includes Bill, Charlie and John. So although John hasn't been explicitly mentioned linguistically in the preceding context, it isn't completely new either. It is given in the sense that it is a member of a set whose membership is given.

(b) A: My daughter says her physics teacher at school is long winded, boring and ignorant.

B: Speaking of physics, I did it at University 20 years ago.
what do you know about quarks?
I've just bought a book by Hawking
will you fix my taperecorder for me

The expression Speaking of...allows the speaker to change the topic of conversation almost completely, just as long as the new topic has the slightest excuse of being connected with the current topic.

In quite a few languages in Africa, the marker that is found on nominal topics is exactly the same marker as found on

locationals, temporals, when-clauses, and sometimes on certain subordinate clauses, and even if-clauses.

Remembering that all these are elements that can provide a framework for the information to follow, this should not be surprising. Thus for example in Godie (Lynell Marchese 1977), adverbial time clauses, and conditionals, nominal topics in left dislocated constructions all take the same topic marker. In other languages of the area, slightly different selections of such constructions will take the same 'topic marker'. It will be helpful in such language situations to ask what factors other than topicality will affect whether the marker is used or omitted. Some factors to be considered include 'challengeability of the information', 'this or other worldliness of the information' and so on.

9 Special pronouns

Some languages have one special set of pronouns to be used when the referent of the pronoun is topic (rather than subject). But if the referent of the pronoun is not topic, then another set of pronouns is used. Galela (Indonesia) is like this.

10 Passive voice.

Example:

John was bitten by a snake. (active: A snake bit John)

Note the following things:

(a) The passive puts John into the topical position and enables the speaker to talk about the object (or patient) of the corresponding active clause. Or in other words, the speaker can choose not to talk about the agent of the action ('a snake')

(b) The passive can happily accommodate an agent which is not given information, whereas the active has an agent which is subject, and subjects in English tend to like given information because they are usually topics. Thus, for example

Our little Johnny has just been bitten by a dirty great Alsatian.
with a given subject-topic, is better than

A dirty great Alsatian just bitten our little Johnny

which has a new, nonreferential topic.

Put in other words, the passive moves an NP with given information into the topical position.

(c) The passive is specially useful when the topic referent has an affected (i.e. non active) role in that part of the story

Example; (from Churchill: History of the English Speaking Peoples)

¹William of Orange was fatherless and childless.
²His life was loveless. ³His marriage was dictated by reasons of state. ⁴He was brought up by a termagant grandmother and in his youth was regulated by one Dutch committee after another. ⁵His childhood was unhappy and his health bad. ⁶He had a tubercular lung. ⁷He was asthmatic and badly crippled.

The paragraph is about William of Orange. All the topics are in bold, all come sentence initially. In sentence 4, the topic is made sentence initial by the passive construction, similarly for sentence 3. The other sentences have either 'be' or 'have' verbs, which also keep the subject-topic in the sentence initial position. This enables us to keep talking about William, i.e. keep the topic constant. Note that not one of the sentences has an active verb, even the non passive sentences don't.

Note how much less coherent the paragraph would be if sentences 3 and 4 were active.

(d) The passive enables the speaker to talk about, i.e. keep audience attention on the central aspects of a situation. Tomlin's analysis of an ice hockey game is a good example.

Here is just one sample of an announcer's commentary:

..Firing it out to center ice, here's John Wensink and Reed Larsen digging after it. It's (puck) picked up by McNab. McNab tried to send it back but he's checked by Reed Larsen. (Larsen) knocked it away from Cashman, picked it up a second time, a nifty 'move in the corner to play if over the left side to Maloney. Danny Maloney. (Maloney) tried to work by Park but couldn't do it.

(the nouns within parentheses mean that the subject in that sentence is a surface zero (or an it), but that that zero (or it) refers to the entity within the parentheses.)

There's a hierarchy or pecking order of who/what gets to be subject of any particular sentence. It is:

player in control of puck > puck > player without puck.

This hierarchy reflects what a member of the audience would be watching for too.

11 Relative Clauses.

In narratives, the information in the relative clause is usually not main event line information. Rather it is secondary information, with such functions as flashbacks, reasons, explanations. That information has, as it were, been 'shunted off onto a siding', 'tucked away out of the way' rather than left on the main line.

Example i

Marlborough **PLANNED** through the winter of 1705 an even more daring repetition of his march to the Danube of 1704. He **HAD SUCCEEDED** IN PROCURING from the King of Prussia, with whom he had immense personal influence, a strong Prussian force to aid Prince Eugene in Northern Italy. He now **SCHEMED** to march across Europe with about 25,000 British and British-paid troops by Coblenz, Stuttgart and Ulm, through the passes of the Alps to join Eugene in Northern Italy. (Churchill; History of the English Speaking Peoples, vol 3)

The verbs **planned**, **succeeded**, **schemed**, are on the main event line of the story at this point. They are shown in caps.

The relative clause with whom he had immense personal influence is NOT event information at all, and not on the main event line. It merely provides an explanation of how he succeeded in procuring from the King of Prussia the strong Prussian force that he needed.

(b) This example describes relationships between King William III of England and his sister-in-law, Princess Anne.

King William treated Anne's husband, Prince George of Denmark, with the greatest contempt. He excluded him from all share in the wars. He would not take him to

Flanders not allow him to go to sea with the Fleet.
 Anne, who dearly loved her husband, was unfuriated by
 these affronts.

The relative clause in the last sentence who dearly loved
 her husband is not event information. It merely explains why Anne
 was infuriated.

12. Conditional clauses (if-clauses)

If clauses are considered by many linguists to be topics.
 (see Haiman 1978 Conditionals are topics. Language.) The
 following considerations are important

(i) In all known languages, the favoured position for if-clauses
 is sentence initial. Many languages allow only sentence initial
 if-clauses. No language is known which has only sentence final
 if-clauses. Compare this with the strong tendency of topics to
 come first in the sentence.

(ii) The if-clause information has to be taken for granted before
 further linguistic business can be transacted. You don't have to
 believe that the if-clause content is true, but you do have to
 accept it for the purposes of the conversation. You can if you
 like just pretend it is true. But you mustn't challenge the if-
 clause content, once you do, you are off onto another discussion.
 This criterion of taking for granted is rather like accepting the
 existence of the referent of a nominal topic; you don't challenge
 the existence of the topic 'John' in 'John saw the snake' either.

(iii) The if-clause defines a possible world which is the
 framework for the information to follow, i.e. at least for the
 main clause of the sentence and possibly for a bit more too..
 (This connects up with the idea of topics being frameworks.)

(iv) In some languages, the morphemes for 'if', 'topic' and
 'question' are the same. All three--if's, topics, and questions
 are open ended, expecting more information. If-clauses need a
 main clause, topics need a comment, questions need an answer.

(v) In languages which do allow sentence final if-clauses, such
 clauses act like right dislocated topics. In other words they
 serve as afterthoughts, repair mechanisms.

(vi) In quite a few languages, the morpheme for 'if' is the same
 as the morpheme for 'when'. Pragmatics, and sometimes tense
 choices will tell which one it is. There remains much to do in
 this area, people tend to bypass it with a handwave.

(vii) Again in quite a few languages, there is no difference
 between the surface forms of hypothetical if-clauses and
 contrafactual if-clauses. This is also an area for further
 careful investigation.

WORD ORDER CONSIDERATIONS

Word order often has to do with topicality. We need to talk about the two together. This is because in quite a few languages, the first position in the sentence is the topic position. However, some languages mark topic with an affix. Some even have topic last. It does not seem to be well understood why some language have topic last, but at least we can trace some tendencies.

First we deal with languages which do have a basic word order (Later we consider languages which do not.).

Languages with subject before object (SVO and SOV word orders)

i. These languages usually have topic first, definite NP's tend to come to the left and indefinite NP's tend to come to the right.

For example consider English movement rules (english has basic word order SVO)

(a) Only definite NP's can move leftward, (in fronting) thus compare

- i. The tree, I cut down just now.
- ii *A tree, I cut down just now.

(b) Only definite NP's can undergo left dislocation, thus compare

- i. John, I saw him this morning.
- ii *A man, I saw him this morning.

(c) Passivization (which involves moving a former object NP to the left to be the new syntactic subject) is much more natural with a definite object NP. Thus compare

- i The tree was cut down by John
- ii ?A tree was cut down by John.

(Note that the active counterparts of both sentences are OK)

However, when there is an active with an indefinite subject, the passive is, if anything more natural. Thus compare

- i A snake bit our little Johnny
- ii Our little Johnny was bitten by a snake

The same sort of thing happens in many languages.

In some languages like Chinese and Russian, a sentence initial NP is interpreted as definite, while a sentence final NP is interpreted as indefinite. There is no affixial morpheme in either language which you can gloss as 'definite'. Thus

ren lai le
people come aspect
The people have come (Chinese)

lai ren le
come people aspect
Some people have come.

v komnate drovaty
in room bed

In the room is a bed (Russian)

drovaty v komnate
bed in room
The bed is in the room

Languages with object before subject (VOS, OVS)

Example

Ojibwa (VOS) has definite NP's sentence finally and indefinites sentence initially (reverse of Chinese and Russian)

mookman ngii-mkaan
knife I-found-it
I found a knife (indefinite first)

ngii-mkaan mookman
I found the knife (definite last)

waya ngii-waabmaa
Someone I-saw him
I saw someone (indefinite first)

*ngii-waabmaa waya (indefinite last is an impossible order)

Note however, that Hishkaryana (Brazil OVS) does not have any restriction on definiteness or indefiniteness of NP's based on position in the sentence at all.)

Languages with no fixed word order.

In these languages, all six theoretically possible word orders are realized. Pragmatic considerations seem to condition all the word orders that are found; nothing is left for syntax, it seems. At least three languages fit this description -Cayuga (Canada & USA), Ngandi (Australia), Coos (Oregon, USA). A cover term for the three pragmatic factors involved is newsworthiness which can break down into three subfactors as follows:

Relative newsworthiness

indefinite information comes before definite information

new information comes before old information

more important information comes before less important

Examples

i (Cayuga-indefinite before definite)

hammer I-see
I'm looking for a hammer (indefinite first)

how then so-it-costs this hammer
How much does this hammer cost (definite last)

ii (Cayuga-new before old, new early in clause)

Context: a dinner guest was asked whether he liked baked potatoes. He answered:

it-is only the peelings not I do-I-eat
 definite-new verb
 I just don't eat the skins.

Pigs just contrast just they-eat the peelings
 new verb old
 Only pigs eat the skins

iii (Cayuga-important information before less important)
 (a) A man telephones his friend to tell him he had lost his wallet.

just here there I-lost-it the my wallet
 new-important new-less important
 Mind you, I lost my wallet. (the losing was more important)

(b) A man has just cut his foot with an axe. His friend asks solicitously whether he is badly hurt. He replies "Not really, because..."

because just-suppose really thick-shoes I wear
 new-important new less important
 I guess because I had really thick shoes on. (the thick shoes were what protected his feet.)

So it looks as if there are at least two different kinds of languages as far as word order considerations are concerned. they are

1. Syntactically based word order languages. In these languages

- i. there is a basic word order,
- ii an deviations from the basic order obey
 - ii.i topic comes first
 - ii.ii more newsworthy information comes finally

2. Pragmatically based word order languages In these languages

- i. there is NO basic word order, rather
- ii. all orderings obey the most newsworthy principle

The agent first (or animated first) principle.

In some languages where all constituent orders are apparently permitted, in fact the preferred orders are those where the agent precedes the patient or whether the more animated participant precedes the less animated participant (where there is a choice.)

Examples

Kechi (Mayan, Guatemala. Basic order VOS)

This language goes for agent first, whenever there is any doubt as to who is agent and who is patient. Otherwise all orders are OK.

Thus in:

heated the tortilla the woman (VOS-basic)
 (VSO)
 (SVO)
 (OVS)
 (SOV)
 (OVS)

are all acceptable because there is no doubt who is agent and what is patient.

However, consider the next example in which just from the nature of the referents of the nominals, either could be agent and either could be patient. In such a case, the basic order is OK, and any order in which the agent precedes the patient is OK, as in the first block of forms. But any order in which the patient precedes the agent is less acceptable or even deviant.

hit the man the woman	(VOS-basic)	OK
hit the woman the man	(VSO)	agent precedes patient-OK
the woman hit the man	(SVO)	 -OK
the woman the man hit	(SOV)	 -OK
?the man hit the woman	(OVS)	patient precedes agent-not OK
*the man the woman hit	(OSV)	 -bad

In some languages, the criterion is rather more animate precedes less animate.

Example: Navaho, USA, SOV basic order.

We have

horse lightning killed 'the lightning killed the horse'
 my son rain wetted 'the rain wetted my son'

in which the criterion is more animate precedes less animate, since horse is more animate than lightning, my more animate than the rain. However, the reverse order is also permitted, viz:

lightning horse killed
 rain my son wetted

in which the criterion for word order now seems to be more agentive precedes less agentive.